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RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS PRIORITY 1185
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 0982
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RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV PRIORITY 3583
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS PRIORITY 0275
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MANAMA 000198

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E.O. 1258: DECL: 02/27/2017

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [ASEC](#) [KISL](#) [BAPOL](#)

SUBJECT: RELEASE OF TWO DETAINEES RESTORES CLM TO SHIA
AREAS, FOR NOW

REF: A. MANAMA 0113

[B](#). MANAMA 0096

[C](#). MANAMA 0093

Classified By: DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) nd (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) ing Hamad February 25 ordered the release of two Shia detainees who had been tried, convicted, and imprisoned for distributing illegal literature during the fall 2006 election campaign season. Their release ended some ten days of sometimes violent demonstrations in and around their two neighboring villages, which resulted in a nearby major road being blocked several times. According to a Ministry of Interior (MOI) press statement, a young man arrested for participating in the demonstrations told police about a training camp on a farm outside the village of Bani Jamra where some 35 youth learned to make and throw Molotov cocktails. Sunni-friendly newspapers ran the story under banner headlines declaring discovery of a "terrorist training camp," while a Shia-run paper printed a satirical story with photos of bored barnyard animals labeled as terrorists. The controversy demonstrates the raw nature of sectarian relations and highlights the challenges the government faces as it tries to navigate a fine line between keeping order, addressing Shia grievances, and maintaining its Sunni base. End Summary.

King Orders Detainees Released

[1](#)2. (SBU) King Hamad February 25 ordered the release of two Shia citizens who were convicted in early February of distributing illegal subversive literature during the fall 2006 pre-election period and given sentences of one year and six months (respectively) in prison. The two detainees, Mohammed Al Sahlawi and Hussain Al Habashi, thanked the political leadership "and all those who have exerted efforts" to gain their release. Al Sahlawi said he hoped theirs would be the last opinion case that enters Bahrain's courts because "we live under the reforms project that is built on freedom

of opinion." Leading Shia political society Al Wifaq issued a statement hailing the move, which it considered "to be a step on the right path."

13. (SBU) Al Sahlawi and Al Habashi's release comes after some ten days of demonstrations in and around their two nearby villages, which straddle a major artery between Manama and the northwestern town of Budaiya. The protests and clashes between participants and security forces, with burning tires and tear gas, forced the closure of the road several evenings and resulted in the arrest of some youth. One of those arrested on/about February 18 told police that he and a companion, who was also arrested, had received training along with some 35 others at a camp on a farm near the village of Bani Jamra. According to the Ministry of Interior, they said they learned how to make and use Molotov cocktails to attack security forces and police. The MOI issued a statement to the press February 19 that it had "uncovered a plot to destabilize the country through organized systematic riots," some of which had already taken place.

Headlines Scream About "Terrorist Camp"

14. (SBU) Local newspapers Al Watan and Akhbar Al Khaleej, which are close to the government and present the news with a pro-Sunni slant, ran articles February 20 covering the MOI statement under bold headlines announcing the discovery of a "terrorist training camp" near Bani Jamra. They also printed a photograph of a box of empty glass bottles identified as

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materials for Molotov cocktails that were seized at the camp. Over the next few days, these papers ran several articles and commentaries condemning this apparent Shia conspiracy inside the country. Daily Al Wasat, a newspaper reflecting Shia issues, slammed back on February 21, running a full-page satirical article about having "stormed terrorist training strongholds" in Bani Jamra and finding a donkey that lost its ear at the camp, a flock of sheep participating in drills, a dog waiting for his orders, and the chimpanzee who is the "leader of the terrorists." A number of pastoral photographs showing bored barnyard animals accompanied the article. Al Wasat also pointed out that the photo of empty bottles in a box that was printed in Al Watan and Akhbar Al Khaleej had been distributed by the Ministry of Interior in January 2006 about an incident that took place in a different part of the country.

15. (SBU) About 100 Bani Jamra residents February 23 staged a peaceful protest to repudiate the accusation that their village was the site of a training camp. That same day, the MOI press office released a statement attempting to clarify the information it had obtained from the two arrested youth and distancing the Ministry from Al Watan and Akhbar Al Khaleej's breathless headlines and coverage. The statement read, "It has been noticed lately that some newspapers and writers exaggerated the Ministry's statement about arresting a person possessing a Molotov cocktail. This statement included the confession of the accused and did not refer to a specific area because the incident could happen in any part of the country." It called on journalists to be more accurate and objective and to refer to the Ministry's statements without embellishment. It released two new photographs of the camp showing a small plot of land with some scrubby plants and seven empty glass bottles lying on the ground.

Clerics Call For Calm

16. (SBU) In their Friday prayer sermons on February 23, Shia clerics Shaikhs Isa Qassem and Abdullah Al Ghuraifi and Sunni

cleric Shaikh Salah Al Jowder all denounced the recurring street violence. Qassem called on youth to stop burning tires and disrupting the flow of traffic. He said, "We are against this and we demand the youth to stop doing it." Al Ghuraifi said there are crises and tensions in the country that must be addressed properly so they do not result in extremism and violence. Al Jowder complained that threats to the country's security come as a result of sectarian and terrorist cultures that enter Bahrain from neighboring countries.

17. (C) During a February 22 meeting, Al Wifaq foreign relations liaison Saeed Al Majed told Pol/Econ Chief that MOI Chief of Public Security General Zayani had phoned Al Wifaq Secretary General and MP Shaikh Ali Salman before the MOI

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released its February 19 statement about the training center. According to Al Majed, Zayani was worried about how Shia youth, who had already been involved in demonstrations for days, would react to the news. He reportedly requested that Salman do what he could to calm people down.

Interior Official Blames Press for Controversy

18. (C) General Zayani told the Ambassador that there was a real location in Bani Jamra where training had been taking place. He said the police had been directed to the site by one of the youth they had arrested. The detainee had said that people had gathered there to learn how to make and throw Molotov cocktails. He indicated that there was not a lot of material at the farm, but there had been instruction going on there. He emphasized that the Ministry of Interior had never said that this was a terrorist training camp. He blamed the press for making an issue out of it - the Sunni papers for

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exaggerating the "terrorism" aspect of the camp, and Shia Al Wasat for attacking the Ministry of Interior so harshly.

19. (C) Information Minister Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar told the Ambassador at a function that people were very angry at Al Wasat for its satirical article, saying that Al Wasat was mocking the MOI and this was something that simply should not be done. Al Wasat, in effect, had crossed the line with this piece, he said. Al Wasat Editor-in-Chief Mansour Al Jamry happened also to attend the function, and he and Abdul Ghaffar soon fell into a heated discussion, which was witnessed by the Ambassador. Al Jamry's point was two-fold: first, it was ridiculous to call this place a terrorist camp.

One does not need training of any significance to learn how to make or throw Molotov cocktails, so it just does not make sense for the government to claim there was such a training camp. Second, he was annoyed that the Sunni press was allowed to write inflammatory, sectarian, anti-Shia articles and editorials, and the government did nothing to stop it. However, it watched what Al Wasat was writing very closely. When the Sunni press called this a "terrorist camp" and the government did nothing to correct the record, he felt he had to do something. Al Jamry told the Ambassador privately that he had been called in that day to see General Zayani, who had requested that Al Jamry scale back the rhetoric in the coming days. Al Jamry agreed to do so, and in fact Al Wasat's coverage has cooled considerably.

Exaggerated Accusations of Terrorism

10. (C) In a separate conversation, Al Wifaq MP Khalil Marzouq told the Ambassador that he was critical of those who equated what the Shia youth were doing with Molotov cocktails and burning tires with "terrorism." Their activities were "such small-scale stuff" that had no relation at all to

terrorism. He was also critical of those who said that the activities of these Shia youth were having a negative impact on the investment climate. (Note: A common refrain in certain newspapers.) Small demonstrations in poor Shia villages were not affecting the investment climate, he stated. However, exaggerated press reporting of "terrorist camps" could.

¶11. (C) In a March 1 conversation, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs and a former Al Wifaq leader Nizar Al Baharna told the Ambassador that the hardline Haq Movement is the force behind recent disturbances. They deploy groups of youth to one place or another to rile people up before moving on, he said. But he discounts allegations of a training camp because "they're not that organized." He said that he spoke to Interior Minister Shaikh Rashid bin Abdullah Al Khalifa about the incidents, and Shaikh Rashid wants to take measures to build trust between the security forces and Shia community. Shaikh Rashid proposed that, when police detain a protester, an Al Wifaq member should be called to be present during processing. Al Baharna said that he told Al Wifaq that when it sees something wrong, from the government or Shia side, it should say so publicly.

Columnists Weigh In

¶12. (SBU) Al Watan columnist Sawsan Al Shaer, who often has a balanced perspective of events, wrote February 25 that the most dangerous consequence of the blow-up over the training camp story is the "evident division of our press" into Sunni and Shia sides. She complained, "The press was biased and did not play the role that it is expected to play to properly reflect the content of a statement as it is." (Note: A reference to the MOI's February 19 statement.) She continued, "We demand that editors-in-chief wait for one minute, reevaluate their work, and start all over again. We need camps to teach us where an irresponsible word could lead us!"

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¶13. (SBU) Likely in reaction to General Zayani's admonition, Mansour Al Jamry in a February 26 column praised the release of Al Sahlawi and Al Habashi, saying it reinforced the political openness that the country has lived in since 2001. He stated, "We must recognize the importance of protecting our rights to freedom of opinion but we also must recognize that we have a responsibility to protect the security of the country... We must establish balance between protecting our country, our youth, and our rights." On February 28, he wrote that there should be a partnership between security agencies and society. Peace and stability cannot prevail without the collaboration of the two sides - the police and the people, promoting a sense of social partnership.

Comment

¶14. (C) The release of Al Sahlawi and Al Habashi has restored calm to the Shia villages in the northern tier of Bahrain, for now. However, the manufactured crisis over the "terrorist training camp" demonstrates the current rawness in sectarian relations. Additionally, while the King's stepping in and ordering the release of the two detainees has soothed Shia nerves, many Sunnis, and not just hardliners, are grumbling about the King's catch-and-release policy, which he has employed several times for Shia troublemakers. The government will continue to navigate a fine line between keeping order, addressing Shia grievances, and maintaining its Sunni base.

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